



Physicians Caring for Texans

Sept. 1, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott  
Office of the Governor  
PO Box 12428  
Austin, TX 78711-2428  
*Delivered via Email*

Dear Governor Abbott:

On behalf of the Texas Medical Association and the 32 undersigned organizations, thank you for your leadership as the state navigates the rapidly changing COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 is an extraordinary public health emergency that requires a vigorous response to limit its spread. We appreciate your timely actions to keep Texans safe as well as executive orders to eliminate regulatory burdens that otherwise may have hindered physicians' and providers' ability to timely care for patients.

**To truly defeat COVID-19, Texas must let loose every authority at its disposal. It is for this reason we write to you now – organizations representing physicians, nurses, consumers, hospitals, long-term care providers, community clinics, and health plans – asking for your support to enact comprehensive health care coverage initiatives.** Doing so not only will help Texas fight COVID-19 but also will place Texas in the best possible position to recover from the pandemic. Enacting a comprehensive initiative will promote the long-term health and financial well-being of Texans, particularly the thousands of essential workers who risk their lives each day to feed, transport, and care for their communities.

Just as important, acting now to extend health care coverage will ensure that when our collective lives return to normal, communities still will have high-functioning health care delivery systems to care for them. Texas' health care sector accounts for 11% of the state's jobs.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, many jobs within this sector have been lost, some permanently, due to the pandemic's ongoing and unpredictable impact on patient volume, cash flow, and uncompensated care. Federal provider relief has helped, but not enough. **According to a recent analysis, the state's rapidly rising number of uninsured could result in the potential loss of 362,000 jobs<sup>2</sup> within Texas' health care industry.** Increasing health care coverage is inextricably intertwined with ensuring the viability of Texas' health care system.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Texas held the dubious distinction of being the uninsured capital of the country, with nearly one in five Texans lacking health care coverage. The pandemic has only exacerbated Texas' problem. Between February and May, an estimated 659,000<sup>3</sup> working Texans lost coverage, with that number expected to climb. Federal funding to offset uncompensated care related to COVID-19 testing and treatment will defray physician and provider costs.<sup>4</sup> But the funding does not cover all the health care services patients will need during and after the pandemic.

Texas must fill this void to care for our workers and families.

People will need COVID-19 testing, treatment, and meaningful coverage beyond the public health emergency. The virus will not go away. It will remain in circulation for the foreseeable future. Regrettably, it also is not the only threat to people's health.

High rates of Texans with chronic conditions, such as obesity, heart disease, pulmonary disorders, and diabetes, put even more of our population at risk of serious complications or death if they contract the virus. Texans of all socioeconomic and racial backgrounds are at risk of contracting COVID-19, yet data clearly show that low-income patients and people of color die from COVID-19 in much greater numbers.<sup>5</sup> This is not because of anything intrinsic to these populations but a symptom of longstanding preexisting health inequities<sup>6</sup> that contribute to higher rates of chronic conditions and poor health status. The virus is much more lethal for people in poorer health.

An estimated 35% of Texans age 18 and older – the backbone of the state's workforce – have chronic medical conditions.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the majority of uninsured Texans are low-income, working-age adults. **Without meaningful health care coverage, the virus will particularly imperil a large swath of Texas' workforce, including many of the very people on whom Texans depend to provide essential services** – grocery store clerks, bus drivers, janitors, and even health care workers. Comprehensive coverage is essential to Texas' efforts to prevent, identify, and treat the chronic conditions that increase the severity of SARS-CoV-2, even once an effective vaccine becomes available. For Texas to recover rapidly from the virus's economic damage – and maintain that prosperity in the future – we will need an army of healthy workers to make it happen.

**It also must be said that prior to COVID-19's arrival in Texas, high rates of uninsured contributed to unsustainable uncompensated care costs for physicians, community clinics, and hospitals, among others.** Since March, more than 3 million Texans have filed for jobless benefits.<sup>8</sup> Jobless Texans still will need medical care – COVID-19-related or not – but more will lack the means to pay for it. Reopening the economy, as conditions warrant, will undoubtedly help. Yet the pandemic also is reshaping the economy in profound and unpredictable ways, making the job market more uncertain. As such, employer-sponsored health insurance likely will be slow to rebound. In the new practice environment, physicians, hospitals and providers cannot easily absorb more uninsured patients as they struggle to stay afloat themselves.

**For all these reasons, we strongly support implementation of a comprehensive health care coverage solution.** The organizations signing this letter stand ready to assist you and other state leaders in creating an acceptable initiative that can maximize Texas' response to COVID-19 and support the citizens of Texas. **Texas has several options to craft a plan designed for the needs of the Lone Star State, including drawing down federal Medicaid funds to cover low-income working Texans.** While Texas has previously foregone this option, earlier this year fellows from the American Enterprise Institute recommended that during this unprecedented crisis all 14 nonexpansion states take advantage of the option for at least two years, stating, "Expanding Medicaid in nonexpansion states to all poor households is critically important during the current crisis because they have no realistic alternative for getting insurance coverage today."<sup>9</sup>

This is not to say Texas would have no input on how the dollars are spent. Conservative states, including Indiana, Ohio, and Utah, have used federal Medicaid dollars to design unique health care coverage plans that fit their own circumstances. We highlight the quote to point out that in extraordinary times, extraordinary action is needed. What once may have seemed unthinkable

may now be necessary to avoid extreme harm. Case in point: In just the past two months, voters in two states – Oklahoma and Missouri – approved ballot initiatives to expand Medicaid.

COVID-19 is an insidious enemy that is bound to be the most wide-ranging and consequential emergency in our state's 175-year history. Quite literally, the virus imperils the lives of thousands of Texans while also threatening the continued viability of our health care system. As such, Texas must respond with every resource at its disposal to ensure this great state can meet the unprecedented health care needs of its residents.

Without question, Texas' ability to meaningfully address its uninsured crisis will require not only your support but also that of state lawmakers. **With less than six months to go before the 87th Texas Legislature convenes, now is the time to roll up our sleeves and devise a health care coverage plan for Texans by Texans.** Our organizations have no shortage of innovative problem-solvers. With our input, along with that of your Strike Force to Open Texas and legislative leaders, we believe **the state can rapidly design a meaningful, statewide health care coverage initiative rooted in the best tradition of Texas values that will improve the health of all Texans, promote economic growth and prosperity, and ensure the viability of the state's health care system.**

We stand ready to help get it done.

Sincerely,



Diana L. Fite, MD  
President, Texas Medical Association

*Joined by the following organizations representing physicians, hospitals, nurses, community clinics, consumers advocates, and health plans*

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists District XI (Texas)  
Children's Defense Fund, Texas  
Coalition of Texans with Disabilities  
Every Texan (formerly CPPP)  
Federation of Texas Psychiatry  
Healthy Futures of Texas  
National Association of Mental Illness, Texas Chapter  
National Association of Social Workers, Texas Chapter  
Teaching Hospitals of Texas  
Texans Care for Children  
Texas Academy of Family Physicians  
Texas Association of Community Health Centers  
Texas Association of Community Health Plans  
Texas Association of Neurological Surgeons  
Texas Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
Texas Association of Otolaryngology  
Texas Chapter, American College of Physicians Services  
Texas College of Emergency Physicians  
Texas Dermatological Society  
Texas Medical Group Management Association

Texas Neurological Society  
Texas Nurses Association  
Texas Ophthalmological Association  
Texas Organization of Rural and Community Hospitals  
Texas Pain Society  
Texas Pediatric Society  
Texas Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Society  
Texas Radiological Society  
Texas Society of Clinical Oncology  
Texas Society of Gastroenterology and Endoscopy  
Texas Society of Pathologists  
Texas Women's Healthcare Coalition

cc: Kent Sullivan, Commissioner, Texas Department of Insurance  
Cecile Young, Executive Commissioner, Texas Health and Human Services Commission

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- <sup>1</sup> [Health Care Employment as a Percent of Total Employment](#), Kaiser Family Foundation, May 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> [Without Federal Support for Health Insurance, Many More Jobs Will Be Lost](#), Families USA, Aug. 3, 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> [The COVID-19 Pandemic and Resulting Economic Crash Have Caused the Greatest Health Insurance Losses in American History](#), Stan Dorn, Families USA, July 17, 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> [COVID-19 Claims Reimbursement to Health Care Providers and Facilities for Testing and Treatment of the Uninsured](#), Health Resources & Services Administration, May 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> [Reducing the Disproportionate Impact Of COVID-19 Among Communities Of Color](#), National Governors Association, June 25, 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> [Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups](#), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 24, 2020.
- <sup>7</sup> [How Many Adults Are at Risk for Serious of Serious Illness If Infected with Coronavirus? Undated Data](#), Kaiser Family Foundation, April 23, 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> [More than 3.2 million Texans have filed for unemployment relief since mid-March](#), Anna Novak and Mitchell Ferman, *The Texas Tribune*, Aug. 21, 2020.
- <sup>9</sup> [Covering the Uninsured During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), Joseph Antos and James C. Capretta, Real Clear Health, March 19, 2020.